

RESPONSE TO COMMENTARY ON "ON HUMAN ORIGINS"**Article Published:** *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 2.4 (1990): 45–58**Author:** Craig Loehle

I would like to commend Craig Loehle's efforts to understand and unravel such a difficult subject as the Bahá'í teachings on evolution. I am studying the Bahá'í teachings on creation, a complementary field to Loehle's and one intimately interwoven with it. I have found that the more I read the Bahá'í texts and try to balance this with studying the history of the intellectual development of these ideas, the clearer as well as the more complex the issues become. Therefore, I believe that Bahá'í scholars should be very cautious in putting forth their ideas as "the Bahá'í view," especially at this early stage in expounding upon the content of the Bahá'í Revelation.

Other than this, I have a few areas of difference with Loehle's revised views on chance and evolution, as published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 5.2 (1992): 72–76. The first has to do with the nature of God's Will. Loehle says: "In earlier periods, divine Will was popularly assumed to be responsible for the fall of every leaf and drop of rain, and individuals were considered to be largely subject to fate. In the Bahá'í view, such detailed manipulation of the natural world by God violates the existence of human free will, upon which our spiritual progress depends . . ." (74). From my own reading of Bahá'í texts, my understanding of the meaning of God's Will, fate, and predestination is different. For example, Bahá'u'lláh writes to one of his followers regarding the inconstancy of the world:

The world hath never had nor doth it now possess stability (*thabát*). . . . But, in truth, whatever taketh place is well-pleasing, for the divine wisdom hath ordained it. Without His command and will not a leaf can stir, and whatever occurreth is conformable to wisdom. All must be contented with it, nay eagerly desire it. However, in some cases, such as when the sweetness of reunion [with God] giveth way to the bitterness of separation and, likewise, when, by the decree of remoteness, nearness and meeting are banished—this causeth sighs of sorrow and grief to be upraised and the tears to flow. Otherwise, the matter is as some of the philosophers have cited from the words of Idrís [Hermes]: "It is impossible for the realm of creation to be better than it already is."¹

But this text, and others like it, must be balanced with such statements as that in *Gleanings*, where Bahá'u'lláh says:

All that which ye potentially possess can, however, be manifested only as a result of your own volition. Your own acts testify to this truth. . . . Men, however, have

1. Provisional translation by the author; original Persian text included with letter of the Universal House of Justice to the author dated 7 May 1991.

wittingly broken His law. Is such a behavior to be attributed to God, or to their proper selves? Be fair in your judgment. Every good thing is of God, and every evil thing is from yourselves.²

It therefore seems clear that in an accurate presentation of the Bahá'í view both free will and predestination are mutually involved in the outcome of history.

In my understanding, what is meant by God's Will, also called the Primal Will in the Bahá'í writings, is, fundamentally, the laws of nature (which include the laws of moral conduct). The Will is the immediate cause of order in the universe. It is not something outside of and arbitrarily manipulating nature's laws—it *is* nature's laws. Bahá'u'lláh states in the *Lawḥ-i-Hikmat*: "Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world."³ The inner aspect of the Will is the laws of nature, which correspond to Plato's concept of the transcendent Ideas of things and to the religious concept of God's originated names and attributes. These laws, or Ideas, or names and attributes, are not nominal creations of the human mind, but they are the immutable and incorporeal realities of a supersensible cosmos upon which the unfolding multiplicity of outer phenomena depend. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains: "The Primal Will [, which is the world of Command,] is the inner reality of things, and all existing things are its manifestations, . . . not manifestations of the divine Reality and Identity."⁴ For more clarification on this subject, the reader can refer to my article "A Bahá'í Perspective on the Origin of Matter," which appeared in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, volume 2, number 3.

In a tablet, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains the interrelationship of God's Will, predestination, and fate. He says that "the necessary and indispensable relationships which exist in the realities of things . . . constitute predestination [i.e., necessary cause and effect relationships], and the manifestation thereof in the plane of existence is fate. Will is that active force which controlleth these relationships and these incidents."⁵ Thus, as in the example from 'Abdu'l-Bahá given by Loehle, it is the decreed fate of a lamp that, if it is lit, its oil will burn and be consumed. This is the necessary cause and effect relationship working between the fire and the oil. The law that determines this relationship is within the Will of God. Now it may be that another necessary cause and effect relationship, such as,

2. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, 2d ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976) 149.

3. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, trans. H. Taherzadeh et al., 2d ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988) 142.

4. Provisional translation by the author in "A Bahá'í Perspective on the Origin of Matter," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 2.3 (1990): 24.

5. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, comp. Research Dept. Bahá'í World Centre, trans. Marzieh Gail et al. (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) 198.

if a wind blows on the flame it will be extinguished, will put out the flame before the oil in the lamp is consumed. 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls this second kind of incident conditional fate, which is similar in meaning to the modern usage of the term *chance*. So chance, in the way that Loehle has explained it, which does not mean "without a cause," also plays a part in natural processes.

Since human beings are part of the web of life, they too cause events and receive the effects of events. But unlike other creatures who live perforce in harmony with nature's laws, human beings have a choice in observing these laws, which, from the perspective of religion, include ethical and spiritual principles meant to guide human relationships. Human will is also created in accord with the wisdom and love of God, and like everything else, it receives the power to act from the Primal Will of God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá compares the condition of the human will to the captain of a ship who is able to turn the ship in whatever direction desired but is dependent on the power of wind or steam to move the ship. This wind or steam is analogous to the Will of God, and without it a human being cannot carry out either good or evil actions.⁶ In sum, human beings and natural phenomena are real secondary agents that directly affect the course of history; whereas, God's Will is the necessary cause sustaining the existence of these secondary agents and giving them the power to act. God's Will also acts through the Revelations of the prophets, and in other mysterious ways, to bring about the goal of evolution, which is the appearance of beings capable of knowing and worshipping their Creator.

The last point I would like to add is not a critique of Loehle's view but a contribution toward understanding the Bahá'í view on evolution. Any adequate study of this subject must also address 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements opposing Darwin's theory of the modification of species.⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that he considers the human species to have existed from the beginning and not to be a modification of an earlier animal species. He says the same thing about all other species. Each is a unique creation, "created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁸ What he means by this is illuminated by another tablet in which he states: "The specificity and essentiality of things are permanent and changeless; only within the limits of a particular species do progress and decline occur."⁹ Certainly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá does not intend by the term *species* (*na'íyyát*) the external, physical forms of creatures, for these are constantly appearing and disappearing. Many species have died out, and others are in danger of extinction. Rather, by "species and

6. *Some Answered Questions*, comp. and trans. Laura Clifford Barney, 4th ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981) 249.

7. Cf. *Some Answered Questions*, chapters 46 and 49.

8. *Some Answered Questions* 199.

9. Authorized translation, *Má'idih-yi ásmání* 9 (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 129 B.E.) 27.

essences" he is probably referring to something akin to preexisting "laws of form" that determine all the possible modes in which creatures can appear. This, I assume, is what Loehle means by "the lawlike component of evolution." Thus, the law determining "humanness" has existed eternally in the Will of God, but its particular appearances in time and space may be subject to random variations caused by genetic mutations or other natural factors. The appearance of a species in space-time may also be cut short by a radical extinction, such as was the case with the dinosaurs.

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